

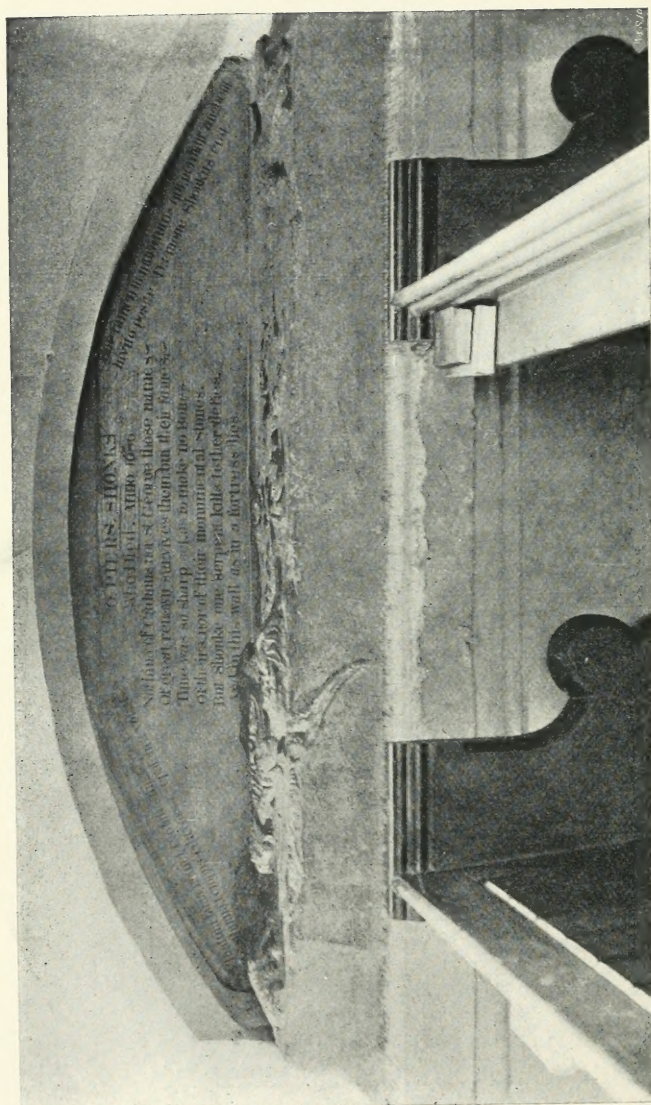
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A Hertfordshire St. George

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Tomb of O Piers Shonks at Brent Pelham.

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BY W. B. GERISH.

VARIANTS of the St. George and the Dragon, the Lambton, Laidley and Linton Dragons or Worms legends are, I think, more uncommon in the eastern and southern part of England than in the north. In the "Folk-Lore Record," vol. i. 1878, pp. 247-249, isolated instances of dragon and serpent legends are quoted from Essex, Herefordshire, Oxfordshire and Sussex, and there are probably others. The dense woods and morasses which existed in ancient times in the northern portion of this country, wherein these partly mythological beasts could take refuge, seem to have produced such accounts in greater abundance and detail.

Brent Pelham or Pelham Arsa, from the fire which it is said destroyed it in the reign of King Henry I., or Pelham Sarners¹ is a small village situated some five miles distant from the Buntingford railway station, and ten miles from Bishop's Stortford. The hero of the story, O Piers Shonks, lived in the manor-house, and was lord of the manor which still bears his name, and is said to have flourished "*Anno a Conquestu* 21."² The only record of any descendant of this name in the neighbourhood is one Gilbert Sank, who in the sixteenth year of King Edward I. was distrained upon by Simon de Furneaux, lord of the Pelhams, for his "Homage and Service and forty shillings and sixpence rent by the year, Fealty and Suit at Court at Pelham Arsa from three weeks to three weeks."³

Among the endowments of the church is a parcel of woodland called Beches and Shonks,⁴ and, according to Weever,⁵ "the old decayed house, weil-moated, called O. Piers Shonkes," was in existence in his time. In Salmon's⁶ time (1728) there was a barn standing on this moated inclosure called Shonks's barn, and that writer states that the manor pays Castle-guard to Bishop's Stortford,

¹ Sarners was the purchaser from the Bishop of London in the reign of William I.

² This is not borne out by Domesday Book.

³ Chauncy's "History of Herts," 1700, vol. i. p. 278.

⁴ Canon Wigram states that "Beeches paid vicarial tithe, nothing else. There was perhaps forty acres of glebe land near that farm."

⁵ Weever's "Funeral Monuments," p. 549.

⁶ Salmon's "History of Herts," p. 289.

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a relic of the feudal system which is, I believe, paid to the lord of the manor of Stortford to-day. It may be that Shonks was the holder of the manor in Saxon times, and that he was superseded by Godfrey de Beche, a Norman, so that the manor was afterwards known as Beches and Shonkes. It is probable that Piers Shonks was the popular favourite, and possibly the founder of the church,¹ the original Saxon edifice being burnt with the rest of the village as before mentioned. The niche wherein the tomb of Shonks now lies is said to be an old doorway,¹ probably part of the original structure, but this is, I think, wrong. There is however an ancient blocked doorway further west, exactly under the central north window. The arch of the tomb is not unlike a door-arch, and was of a sufficient height probably for a doorway. Salmon ingeniously suggests that Gilbert Sank might be the father of Peter or Piers (we must disregard a difference of two centuries to allow for this), who "being oppressed by the tyrannical power of De Furneaux, his son might take the cause in hand and show his adversary's demands unjustifiable, and baffle him at law. By which he might do service to the neighbourhood, and save them from the same exorbitant imposition. And this was enough to canonize him." If I remember rightly, a somewhat similar suggestion is made respecting the giant Hickathrift of Norfolk.²

Salmon concludes his account by stating that he asks leave to finish his "Nisi prius argument with the relation given to me by an old farmer in the parish, who valued himself for being born in the air that Shonk breathed. He saith, 'Shonk was a giant that dwelt in this parish, who fought with a giant of Barkway named Cadmus³ and worsted him; upon which Barkway hath paid a quit-rent to Pelham ever since.'⁴ So that Horace's rule is at Pelham still observed.

Aut famam sequare, aut sibi convenientia finge."

Sir Henry Chauncy (1700), beyond the allusion before mentioned, has naught to say respecting the legend, but merely quotes the Latin and English inscriptions on the tomb. Cussans (1872), our most recent county historian gives the following account.

"The most interesting monumental record in Brent Pelham church is an altar tomb within an arched recess in the north wall, said to have been erected to one Piers Shonks, who died in the year

¹ See illustration.

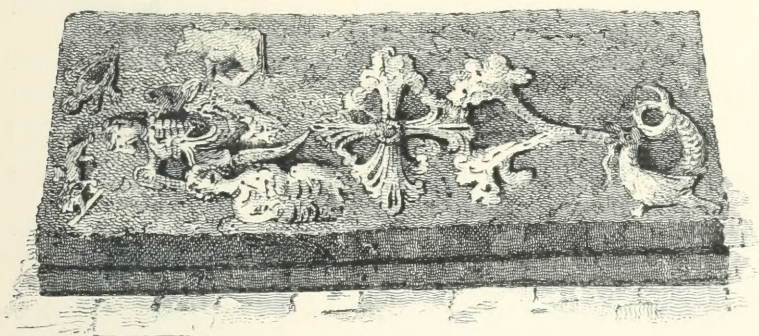
² "Gentleman's Magazine," January, 1896.

³ The Cadmus referred to, it is hardly necessary to state, was no local giant, but the fabled Phœnician dragon slayer.

⁴ This quit-rent was the usual copyhold tenure, of course.

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1086. The tomb is of great antiquity (although scarcely earlier than 1300 and probably rather later), but was evidently constructed many years after the period assigned to Shonks's death. It consists of a thick slab of Petworth marble, on which is carved in relief an emblematical representation of the Resurrection. At the head are St. Mark and St. John, with St. Matthew and St. Luke on either side, symbolized in the usual manner.¹ In the centre is a cross fleurie, the stem of which is thrust into the mouth of a grotesque figure at the foot of the slab, signifying the triumph of Christianity over sin.² Simple and beautiful as these symbols are, they have given rise to the most absurd traditions. The most popular is that Piers Shonks (in whose memory the monument is said to have been erected) was a mighty hunter, and was always accompanied in his expeditions by one attendant and three favourite



hounds, so swift of foot that they were said to be winged, and are so represented on the tomb.³ Chancing one day to kill a dragon, which seemed to have been under the immediate protection of Satan, the latter declared that he would be revenged on Shonks, and would have him at his death, whether he was buried within or without the church. Shonks, to avoid his fate, directed that he should be buried neither within nor without the sacred building, but in the wall, and feeling perfectly secure in that position, ordered that a representation of his achievement should be carved on his tomb. On the wall at the back of the tomb is painted this inscription, said to have been composed by the Rev. Raphael Keen, who died in 1614. He was Vicar here for seventy-five and a half years."

¹ The symbols are the Lion, Angel, Bull and Eagle.

² See illustration.

³ The four Evangelistic symbols, as above.

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Tantum Fama manet Cadmi Sanctique Georgii,
Posthuma Tempus edax Ossa sepulchra vorat.
Hoc tamen, in Mura tutus, qui perdidit Anguem
Invito positus, Demone, Shonkus erat.

O Piers Shonkes
Who died Anno 1086.

Nothing of Cadmus, nor St. George, those Names
Of great Renown, survives them but their Fames.
Time was so sharp set as to make no Bones
Of theirs, nor of their Monumental Stones.
But Shonk one serpent kills, t'other defies,
And in this Wall, as in a Fortress, lies.

It is possible that the last couplet may have given rise to the tradition, or the reverend author may have embodied the traditional belief therein.

The accounts given locally vary in detail as is usually the case. The chief variant is, that when Piers was on his death-bed he called for his bow and an arrow, and shot it at random from his window, commanding that he should be buried where the arrow fell. The arrow passed through one of the church windows and transfixed itself in the wall where the tomb now is.¹

Some thirty or forty years ago a patriarchal old villager told Mr. W. H. N., of Watford, that he either remembered or heard that on an excavation being made under the wall near the monument, that bones supposed to be Shonks's were found, and from their proportions would have belonged to a man from nine to ten feet high. Whether these were replaced in the tomb or not he did not know.

The following account, written some years ago by the then vicar of Brent Pelham (the Rev. W. Wigram, M.A.), is worth quoting here. He says:

"The site of the hero's house is marked by the moat which once surrounded it, in a pasture still called 'Shonkes' Garden' upon Beeches' Farm. The tomb is in the north wall of the church and is of thirteenth-century work. The staff of the cross is driven like a spear through the mouth of the dragon. In the foliation of the cross is a small figure, a good deal injured; which may represent the human soul. The chancel of the church was rebuilt about forty years ago, and is now in a straight line with the nave. Formerly it inclined so much to the north that room for a small vestry was gained between the original north wall

¹ Have we not here a type of the Robin Hood story?

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(which was left as it stood) and the line of the existing north wall, hence the south window of the chancel looked through the chancel arch, and an arrow entering at the south window could have struck the north wall of the nave.

A terrible dragon kennelled under a yew-tree which stood between what were afterwards two fields called Great and Little Pepsells; and the stile in the pathway which crossed them was set up in the stem of this tree when it was split open, as such trees do with extreme old age. This dragon was killed by Shonkes and as it was dying, Satan himself arose and claimed Shonkes's body and soul for slaying his dragon. The Christian Knight defied him, promptly replying that his soul was in the keeping of Heaven, and that his body should rest where the arrow then upon his bow-string should fall. He shot accordingly, and the arrow entering the south window of the crooked chancel, passed through the chancel arch and struck the north wall at the spot in which Shonkes still rests

‘Invito Dæmone.’

In subsequent ages the yew-tree was cut down by a labourer well known to my informant. The man began his work in the morning, but left it at breakfast-time, and on returning, found that the old tree had fallen, collapsing into a large cavity underneath its roots.

That such cavities have been found in other cases under old yew-trees I have been told. Whether this one was simply enlarged by the dragon for his own convenience, or whether it was dug out by the creature's claws there is no evidence to show. I tell the tale as it was told to me and point to the wall of the old chancel and to the tomb as evidence.”

Is the legend of Shonks and the Dragon merely an allegorical story of the triumph of Christianity over Paganism, or is it an early instance of the village Hampden withstanding the petty tyrant of the village as suggested by the historian Salmon? Or was the dragon an actual reality, preying, as the Indian tiger does to-day, upon the village community, until one, more valiant or clever than the rest, by strategy overcame the loathsome beast and for ever afterwards was idolized as a hero by the villagers. Fossil remains of extinct animals have often been found in the clay pits of eastern Hertfordshire, none of which are of so recent a date as the tenth or eleventh centuries. But the story may be, as I think it possibly it was, very much older, dating back possibly to pre-historic times, but more probably to the Celtic period. The story thus handed down from father to son has become connected in the usual materialistic way with the monumental slab, assisted

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during the past two centuries, as Mr. Cussans says, by the epitaph.¹

It is worth noticing that large Maltese crosses are cut in the stone quoins of the two north buttresses on the exterior of the church, between which Shonks's tomb is situated. They are very fresh and were, I understand, recut at the restoration.

To Canon Wigram and Mr. Ed. Exton Barclay I am indebted for valuable assistance in compiling this paper.

¹ Salmon indeed says "And the Fame of Shonk . . . might induce the People full of his Praises, to fix upon something visible by which his Story might be conveyed to Posterity."

